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SUBJECT: NATIONAL ACTION PARTY BENEFITS FROM VOTER DISAFFECTION IN
BAJA

REF: 08 TIJUANA 1149

SUMMARY

1. The ruling National Action Party (PAN) is likely to dominate July 5 mid-term elections for federal deputies in Baja California Norte. The opposition in Baja California is divided. Voters are frustrated with politicians of all parties, but will manifest their dissatisfaction by staying home on election day or joining the national movement to nullify their vote, rather than voting the incumbent party out of office. Eventually, however, the PAN will need to address voters' concerns about narco-violence and the economy. END SUMMARY.

IT'S THE PAN'S TO LOSE

2. Reliable polls are hard to come by, as most are sponsored by and therefore biased in favor of a particular party's candidate. However, Jose Ramirez Bilbao, a professor of politics and law at the Ibero-American University, calculates the PAN is secure in at least five, or possibly six, of the state's eight electoral districts. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has a chance of winning in the seventh district, encompassing the small town of Tecate (previously a PRI stronghold, though the current mayor hails from the PAN) and District I, which includes the state's capitol, Mexicali. It will also challenge the PAN in Tijuana's fourth district, where a charismatic candidate, Fernando del Monte, from the tiny New Alliance Party (PANAL) is forcing both the PAN and PRI to campaign more vigorously and making the outcome in that district unpredictable.

3. The PAN's strength going into these elections might not be a surprise in the state which was the first in all of Mexico to elect a PAN governor in 1989. The state's current governor and four of its five mayors are from the PAN (and the fifth is a PRIista in name only), and all but one (a plurinomal) of its current federal deputies are PAN. Still, Baja's maquila-dominated economy has, like most northern Mexican states, been hit hard by the US slowdown. That, combined with public despair over the government's inability to quell narco-violence might have produced a protest vote against the incumbent party. Not so in Baja.

THE LONG SHADOW OF HANK

4. One reason is the lack of a viable alternative in the state. The PRI in Baja is struggling to come out from under the shadow of Tijuana's former PRI mayor, Jorge Hank Rohn, best known for his ties to organized crime and maintaining an animal menagerie in the municipal hall. The 2007 elections which brought the PAN to such dominance in the state are largely seen as a protest vote against Hank and the "PRIistas." Moreover, the Baja "PRIistas" are divided into at least two camps, one led by Hank, and the other by PRI Senator Fernando Castro Trenti. Also, according to Manuel Rodriguez, a 29-year-old former "PRIista" and now candidate for the Green Party (PV), Hank has alienated many of the young PRI militants in the state, causing them to flee to small parties (although the PV is known to be

close to the PRI party apparatus, so Mr. Rodriguez has not strayed far). As in many states in northern Mexico, the country's other major party, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), is virtually non-existent in Baja.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

15. But the main reason the PAN is likely to come out on top of the July 5 elections is that the protest vote, inasmuch as there will be one, will come in the form of null votes or voter absenteeism. Virtually all observers expect turnout to be low (perhaps only twenty-five percent), and the national campaign to cast null votes as a form of protest has struck a chord in Baja. Many voters, especially young ones, have little faith in the government, from whatever party, to solve their problems. Najla Wehbe Dipp, another young candidate from PANAL who is bravely (though hopelessly) running against the Governor's brother in District V, laments that the few people who do vote will be PAN loyalists, who other parties would never win over anyway. She said the challenge for candidates from other parties like herself is to convince the other seventy-five percent of voters that nothing will change if they refuse to vote. Wehbe told poloff, "people from my generation think they will punish the government by casting a null vote. But, it is actually the opposite. They will only be helping to return the same people to power."

BUT MAYBE NOT FOREVER

16. None of this means the PAN can rest on its laurels. The PAN in Baja also suffers from division. The national PAN apparatus created bad feelings among local party loyalists by (in their view) forcing the candidacy of Gaston Luken in District V while local "PANistas" favored another candidate. Further party division is going to ensue as party heavyweights start vying for the 2010 Tijuana mayoral race. Also, while the electoral reform which went into effect last year (ref) will not have an impact on the final results of the election, according to Antonio Valladolid, an outgoing PAN deputy from Baja, the reform, which shortened the campaign period and reduced the amount of money parties can spend, is obliging the PAN to make more grassroots efforts than it has needed to in the past. In addition, Guillermo Caballero, a pollster hired by the state government, is warning the PAN administration that on the economic front, it is creating expectations it cannot meet. "Every day in the paper, some PAN official is talking about a new factory or investment that will supposedly turn the state's economic fortunes around, but the voters don't yet feel any economic recovery. Creating these high expectations could come back to bite the PAN."

17. COMMENT: For now, though, the PAN is safely ensconced in Baja. The state's next representatives to the national legislature, from whichever party, can be expected to continue to support a federal police and military presence in the state because voters do not see any other option amid continued violence. This cannot, however, be interpreted as contentment among the population. Sooner or later, the government will have to start showing some results on the economic and security fronts.

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